

ADDRESS OF MS EWA KOPACZ, MINISTER OF HEALTH OF POLAND

Hearing on ‘The handling of the H1N1: more transparency needed’

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee
Paris, 29th March 2010

Madame Chair, Ladies and Gentleman,

Thank you much to the Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Europe for taking up a subject that gave rise just recently to so much emotion and controversy. Thank you also for making it possible for the Polish Minister of Health to share her experience and the actions that we undertook during last year's flu pandemic. A pandemic whose announcement cost the world's tax payers hundreds and millions of Euros and at the same time ensured enormous additional profit for producers of vaccines for the pandemic.

Ladies and Gentleman the Polish reaction to this flu pandemic threat, a reaction which was quite different from those that prevailed in many other countries, was not the result of light-heartedness or slow decision making. From the time when in March April 2009 the first information was available about people falling ill with flu caused by a hitherto unknown virus called H1N1 Polish epidemiological and crisis reaction services immediately prepared themselves, analysed the situation and proposed appropriate measures to react to the possible threat. We also remained in close touch with the ECDC and other European and national centers designated to combat the new virus. Our actions were undertaken in accordance with a national pandemic plan developed on the basis of WHO's guidelines. Experts on epidemiology and infectious diseases issued recommendations for doctors and other healthcare professionals, we conducted a broad ranging informational educational campaign in particular aimed at children and school age youth and we also ensured that we combated symptoms of panic and general social unease.

It should be added that the relatively rapid announcement of successive levels of pandemic threat by WHO caused a lot of interest in the media which didn't really verify the significance of the figures that were provided and started to talk about upcoming 'apocalypse'. The media of course reminded societies of the famous 'Spanish' flu of 1918-1919 and the more recent avian flu which raised the level of social disquiet without the facts to support those statements. And that is why we prepared and transmitted information in accordance with our pandemic plan and we used the medical information available about the degree of threat but that was often marginalised by the media and they concentrated on the threat.

We also analysed the situation in the countries of the Southern Hemisphere where the flu season was underway and we were becoming very aware of the moderate nature this

pandemic. All of this made it possible for us to serenely analyse the situation in so far as the alleged pandemic was concerned and to draw the appropriate conclusions. Ladies and Gentleman we wanted to take into consideration all possible scenarios so we invited pharmaceutical companies to negotiate with us, companies that were working on a vaccine against the H1N1 flu virus. The Polish Flu Pandemic Committee had defined a high risk group including 2 millions persons in accordance with the recommendations of WHO and the ECDC and the Polish government set aside resources to buy appropriate numbers of vaccines but the conditions of purchase for vaccines proposed by producers were dubious for us, vaccines were to be purchased only by governments and not available directly to individuals, and to units of health care system, the producers of the vaccine expected that Polish government would take full responsibility for any undesirable side effects offering sale at the risk and on the responsibility of the purchaser.

For a long time it was also not clear whether each of us should be vaccinated once or twice and we were also concerned about information in the Euravigilin system about various undesirable effects and even the suspicion of some deaths. And the fact that the vaccine as offered was 2 to 3 times more expensive than vaccines against seasonal flu produced on the basis of the same technology is a fact on which I will not comment upon.

For these reasons the Polish government and I personally fully responsibly undertook a position not to purchase the vaccines on the conditions that were offered by pharmaceutical companies. I said at the time in the Polish parliament 'is it my responsibility to sign contracts in the interests of Poland or contracts in the interests of pharmaceutical companies?' I must admit that I said this as a doctor who has sworn to act for the good of patients and as a politician who has sworn to act in the interests of citizens. It is really not acceptable that producers of a medical vaccine thanks to the media campaign and taken advantage of fear that they should force government to take certain decisions; it is not acceptable for producers not to take responsibility for product for safety of patients and for undesirable side effects. It is not acceptable that governments should become hostages to interest groups and should take decision in an atmosphere of panic resulting from alarmist announcements in the media or the opinion of experts who have an interest in the situation themselves and who have not based their analysis on scientific terms, that is not acceptable at all.

Bitter thought to end, at the beginning of information becoming available 30 April 2009 during meeting Luxemburg during a meeting of Health Ministers of the European Union I talked about the need for coordination of purchases and distribution of vaccines by countries of the Union considering that combating the pandemic should be based on genuine European solidarity. I said that the criterion of access to the vaccines should not be how rich a country is but rather to what extent it is epidemiologically threatened. And I find it very painful to share with you the thought that there was no coordinated action by the community that the European answer to the pandemic threat which turned out to be not so serious as we initially thought has shown that in the European Union there is a deficit of solidarity and this lesson also shows that the announcement of each successive level and the scale of pandemic by WHO must be preceded by a very good scientific analysis and correct evaluation of the threat. Premature announcement of a pandemic,

elimination of the criterion of the level of threat of the virus by WHO and using mainly the geographic criteria without taking into consideration the number of cases actually occurring within a given region has resulted in this excessive reaction by most countries in the world and I think that the international community is expecting now that WHO reduce the announced level of threat to the actual pandemic situation in individual regions of WHO which has not yet been the case.

And finally, this test was failed also and perhaps first and foremost by companies who produce vaccines because for them, corporate profit was more important than social responsibility. The experiences of last year's pandemic announcement are a very important lesson for us, we paid a very high cost – what is important now would be to draw the appropriate lessons from that experience.
Thank you.